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Mengele mail makes mockery of manhunt

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By Michael Bonafield
WASHINGTON TIMES FOREIGN SERVICE

MUNICH, West Germany — The hunt for Nazi war criminal Josef Mengele apparently has come to an end. But questions are beginning to be raised about how Mengele, the most sought after Nazi fugitive, could communicate with such openness during the past four decades with at least two people in Germany.

That fact, said one expert, has made a mockery of the global manhunt mounted for Mengele since the end of World War II.

Norman Stone, 44, a Scottish professor of history at Worcester College, Oxford, spent a week here examining documents obtained by Bunte, a mass-circulation magazine.

The letters and notebooks Mr. Stone pored over, and which Bunte obtained from Mengele's 41-year-old son, Rolf, reveal that Mengele simply used the mails to write to both his son and Hans Sedlmeier, an employee of the Mengele family business in Gunzburg, southwest of Munich.

"It shows," Mr. Stone said, "that when you are running from the international police, hide in the obvious place."

Mr. Stone told reporters he believes Rolf Mengele, with whom he had a three-hour conversation, had no links with his father other than blood. Calling Josef Mengele a "stupid, pedantic, humorless old man living in Brazil," Mr. Stone described Rolf Mengele, a lawyer in Freiburg, as a "completely credible character who never identified with his father."

If that were so, Mr. Stone was asked, why didn't Rolf Mengele report his father's whereabouts to authorities? "That is something you will have to ask him," Mr. Stone replied.

Rolf Mengele has declined so far to answer questions or talk with reporters. The Mengele family is said to be planning a comprehensive news conference, but no date has yet been set.

The idea of Josef Mengele — who was called the "Angel of Death" because of the gruesome experiments he conducted at Auschwitz — conducting open correspondence through the postal services of various countries has shocked police officials.

"It is a matter of detective work, or really the absence of good detective work" that accounts for Mengele's success, said a Munich police official.

"From what I have been able to learn of the investigation," he said, "most of the attention has focused on known methods by which former Nazis communicated with one another. The notion that Mengele merely put letters into a mailbox seemed ridiculous."

Questions of a cover-up are being suggested. How, asked one Munich newspaper last week in a banner headline, could Mengele have written so openly when officials from more than a dozen countries were searching for him?

"Cover-up is not a precise word," said the Munich police officer, who spoke on condition that he not be identified.

"I think it is more a question of overlooking the obvious in favor of some sort of exotic conspiracy, like 'Der Spinner,' " he said.

"Der Spinner," is the name given to an elaborate network allegedly set up in the closing weeks of World War II to assist members of the Nazi SS to escape allied war-crimes trials.

Mengele, who was noted for his monstrous operations on twins — surgeries conducted without benefit of anesthetic — was a physician in the SS. He originally served in the Waffen SS, or armed SS, on the eastern front before transferring to Auschwitz.

Police in Sao Paulo, Brazil, have said the bones now identified by forensic experts as Mengele's will be put at the disposal of the Mengele family, and if the family does not want them, they will be reburied in the grave from which they were exhumed.

The Israeli Justice Ministry, however, has said it would not accept the forensic findings until it can examine them.

Former Israeli spy chief Isser Harel, whose Mossad intelligence agency tracked Mengele in South America, contends that if Mengele had drowned in 1979, his family in West Germany would have tried to prove it then.

"If he died six years ago, why did his family and people who protected him conceal this fact?" asked Miriam Tzeiger, a twin who survived cruel "genetic" experiments by Mengele. Mrs. Tzeiger would like the Nazi doctor's bones scattered over the ocean so that he, like his victims, would have no grave. "I think it's a story invented to stop the hunt after Mengele," she said.

But Israeli police officer Menachem Russek, one of the experts aiding the Brazilian investigation, said he now accepts the results of the inquiry. "I believe that with experts of the caliber we have here, you have to accept the conclusion," he said in Sao Paulo.

The policeman, himself a survivor of Auschwitz, conceded: "Maybe I'm a little disappointed that he was not brought to trial."

This article is based in part on wire service reports.

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